

**MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

Honore & Jeannette Breton
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 014
January 17, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Jeannette and Honore Breton at their home on Scribner Blvd. in Lewiston, Maine. The date is January 17th, the year 2006, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu and this is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. Could I start with you, Honore, and ask you to tell me where and when you were born?

Honore Breton: January 28, 1926 in Lewiston, Maine, on River Street, dans Petit Canada.

Jeannette Breton: He didn't stay there long.

AL: So Little Canada area of town?

HB: I stayed there six months. Then I move on Scribner.

AL: Okay, so you've lived here for a long time.

HB: Yeah, not over here but -

JB: Down there.

HB: On the same street, but with my father and mother on 151 Scribner.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

HB: I got two brothers and one sister.

AL: And your parents, were they both from Lewiston, too?

HB: Yes, my father was from Augusta, and my mother was born over here in Lewiston.

AL: And did they work in the mill at all?

HB: My father did, he worked in the (*unintelligible word*) laundry, and when that closed down he went up and worked at the Bates mill, in the spinning room.

AL: In the spinning room? And was he still working there when you went to work at the mill?

HB: Yes, yes, he started in 1942 working the mill.

AL: And how did you get your job at the mill?

HB: Oh, I just went up and, during the vacation, school vacation, I went up and I asked for a job and I got one, at the Hill mill on the third shift. I didn't like the third shift, so I went up to see at Bates, and I knew the guy that was hiring so he got me a job on the first shift, in the finishing room. So I worked there

for about forty-nine and a half years.

AL: Oh, wow. And what sort of work did you do in that area?

HB: I was a general head fixer in the finishing room.

AL: And what did you fix?

HB: All kinds of machineries, you know, and especially bundling machine, you know, where the spread was fold, and then they put in plastic bags and, a sealing machine.

AL: And what, do you think that it helped that your father worked there, to get you a job?

HB: No, no. I knew the guy that was hiring, so, he was a mayor of Lewiston, Maine at that time.

AL: Who was it?

HB: I think it was Lambert. You know, we used to play baseball, you know, and he was coming to the game all the time and that's how I knew him, you know.

AL: Did you play sports at the mill, too? I remember there were teams.

HB: Oh yes, yes, we play softball and we had softball games there. And I didn't play hockey, but I played hockey with the Holy Cross School, but we played softball. And bowling.

AL: So you had social activities besides work at the mill.

HB: Yes, yeah. We had a good time at that, you know, in those days. Everybody was friendly and, you know, it's not like a rat race like today. Today it's rush, rush, rush. You know, we used to play ball.

AL: And, Jeannette, could you tell me where and when you were born?

JB: June 10, 1928 in Lewiston, in Petit Canada. Yeah, that's where I was born, in the rent we were living in. We were living in an apartment of Pepere Bosse, my grandfather.

AL: So you had a few generations living together.

JB: Yes, yeah.

AL: And your parents, were they from Lewiston?

JB: Yes, yes, both from Lewiston.

AL: And your grandparents? Did they come from Canada or were they born -?

JB: La Canada, I think, Canada. My grandparents came from Canada. The Beaulieu came from Canada, and I think the Bosse, too, I think.

AL: Did you ever go to Canada on family trips?

JB: I went to Canada often, but not (*unintelligible phrase*). They're all old people. I didn't go to see the old, old people. They used to come down, though, anyway, we saw them, they used to come down often.

AL: So they maintained the family connection.

JB: Yeah.

AL: So can you tell me what it was like growing up in Lewiston in the thirties and forties?

JB: Oh, it was nice. I think I like it that way, yeah, me too. We were playing in the street, us.

HB: Yeah, she's a city girl.

JB: A city girl, I'm a city girl, right. We were playing in the street. We had rocket thing, playing ball and all that thing. We like it. I like it a lot. And we used to skate on the river, River Street. Yeah, I like that.

HB: Roller skates.

JB: Roller skate, yeah, that's right, yeah. It was good, it was good, I like it.

AL: Was church a big part of your life growing up?

HB: Church?

JB: Church, oh we used to go to church, yeah, often, yeah. We would go to society over there, and the priest was strict, too.

AL: Did you, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

JB: Two sister. I'm the oldest, and the middle and the baby one. The baby one, she look older than me, she got all white hair.

AL: And you mentioned before we started the interview that your mom is still living, and she's a hundred and one?

JB: And she'll be a hundred and two in June, yeah.

AL: So what area, tell me about your time in the mills. You started at Hill mill and then went to Bates?

JB: Yeah, Bates after, yeah, in 1971 when they closed the Hill, they send me out to Bates. So I learned to fold. That's what I like. I went to the upstairs to (*unintelligible word*) for a while but I didn't know, I didn't like it anyway, but I used to go anyway. So I went downstairs, and I used to fold over there. I like it over there, yeah, yeah, I told the girl, I said I should have come here first. They said they started to do piece work, (*unintelligible phrase*), oh, good for them. So we were on piecework over there. That's why I like it. Me, I was on day work, (*unintelligible word*), day work pay.

(*Rustling of paper.*)

AL: Oh, wow. Now what, this is 1985?

HB: That's what she was doing.

AL: Oh, this is a picture from the *Lewiston Journal* in, Wednesday, September 11th, 1985, and Jeannette is demonstrating the folding of the bedspreads. Oh, and this was at a festival.

JB: Yeah.

AL: It's called the Lewiston-Auburn Mill Festival. Was that an annual festival?

JB: They opened the mill for everybody (*unintelligible word*).

HB: Yeah, open up the mills so people could -

JB: Could go where -

AL: And look around and see how everything operated?

JB: (*Unintelligible phrase*).

AL: Oh, neat. I like that, that's really neat. And I also want to mention on the tape, this edition of the *Bates Spinner* from December 1970, and there's a nice picture of the two of you with your Mom?

JB: Yeah, and his brother.

HB: His brother.

AL: And his brother.

HB: Yeah, uncle.

JB: Uncle, yeah, it's uncle for us, yeah.

AL: Wow, that's nice. And so, you've talked about some of the jobs that you did in the mill. I have, were there things that were tough about the job?

JB: No, no, I used to be a battery hand on the Hill, when I started. I started in 1944. I graduate from school and the week after, I took a week vacation, and I went into there. I didn't tell my mother. And then I started to be a battery hand, and after that they changed the battery hand to (*unintelligible word*) girl, so I was a (*unintelligible word*). I like it better than battery hand, (*unintelligible word*).

AL: What did the battery hand do?

JB: You have to change the battery and put (*unintelligible phrase*) to keep it going for the loom. I don't have no picture of that, I don't think so.

AL: At the time you were at the mill, did things change over the time you were in terms of the type, the equipment, the technology?

JB: Well, they did change a, they change a bit, yeah.

AL: In what way?

JB: Well, it used to be battery, but after that we were unifill girl. I like it better that way, unifill.

HB: See, a battery hand, you had to pull the string and tie it up to the loom. A unifill just put the bobbins over there and they would take the thread by itself.

JB: Yes, yes, it was better, it was better, I like it better.

HB: So a battery hand, they had so many of the looms to take care of, and with unfill, well, they add up more, see? And then when the mill closed, she went up to the Bates and she had a job inspecting, folder, you know, looking in the bedspreads and folding the bedspreads. Which was better for her, and better pay.

JB: Better pay, better pay, too.

HB: Yeah, because she was on piecework.

AL: Right. And what would you do if there was something wrong with the bedspread? What happened then?

JB: Oh, we had to put it aside, and there was a lady over there especially for that, and we have to put a sticker on it and give it to her, she fix it up.

HB: She fix it up. She fix it up or she goes on a second.

JB: Yeah, yeah, when she can't fix it up, it was too big, well, second, (*unintelligible phrase*) for second.

AL: So did you have a lot of friends that worked with you at the mill?

JB: Oh yes, oh yes, we had a lot of fun over there. We were all a big bunch of friends over there. We used to eat at noontime where they had no place for nobody else. We were twelve, thirteen at that table.

AL: So you were a big group that stuck together.

JB: We were a big group, yeah, we all stuck together, yeah.

HB: In the finishing room they had about three hundred women. Just a few men.

JB: When there was something wrong, they said, tell your husband, he's going to come fix. No, no, you better tell her yourself. I might have to wait two, three weeks before he come. No, no, no, not me.

HB: (*Unintelligible phrase*). No, but you know, it's odd in a way, you know, when you're working with your wife like this, you know, in the same department, you can't, you know, be too good to her, you know, because the other one will say, hey. So.

AL: And how did the two of you meet?

JB: Oh, we met at a wedding, in 1948, '49?

HB: Forty-nine.

JB: A brother married my girlfriend on River Street. That's how we met, yeah. He came, he asked me for a date and he come to see me, and he goes to the wrong place.

HB: No, but it's funny, you know, I had a date that night, you know, and one of the girls that was in the party there, she was with me at the wedding, but I was not with her. And I went to the wrong apartment. They were living, you know, it was by blocks, next door. And she says, oh, it's across there, so I went up to about fifty-six, and she live at fifty-two.

JB: And he went upstairs, you were going upstairs. I don't know what (*unintelligible phrase*) going upstairs. He found me.

AL: He found you, though.

JB: Yeah, yeah, they told me.

AL: Were there certain people that you worked with at the mill that you remember that stick out in your mind, supervisors or other workers? Can you talk about some of those people?

HB: Oh, my first supervisor was Gus Mullen. He was a short guy, he had red hair, and he's the one that gave me the job, you know, as a fixer. This guy was running the department but he had knowledge of machinery, and he gave me a job to, helper. And when the guy died, and I took his place. And one of my boss, well, I had quite a few bosses in forty-nine years, you know, I had Irwin Bradley, he was a farmer but he was a nice guy. I can't say nothing against the boss, because I was my own boss. You know, I could, well the last twenty I did what I want to do, because they never check on me, and they knew I was there all the time. And in the morning they used to go around and check if all the peoples are in. Me, I could come in at nine o'clock, they wouldn't know. But, you know, but I was there all the time, though. I went out sick twice. I remember one was for my knees, and one was for my fingers.

AL: Was the fingers from working?

HB: Yes. You know, they had the chutes, a conveyor belt, the stitcher had a conveyor belt and when they stitch the spreads would go up the conveyor belt and land into a, in the basket after they were finished. So one day this conveyor belt, the chains broke, roller chains broke, and I went over to fix it and I shut the power off. But the switch is close by the basket, you know, but nobody, well we knew that the switch was there but we never thought, you know, that something could happen. And I put the switch off, and I put the roller chains together, and when I put the links in, the girl step on the pedal and the roller chain start working and my fingers went through the gear. So I lost, I, just the end of my fingers, you know. And they thought it was my fault, you know, so a month or so after Joe Belanger, one of the boss, was with me and the same thing happened, you know, the chains broke and he's the one who put the power off. But somebody went by and push the basket and it hit the switch and the switch went on. So they found out that I was right. It was an accident. And the girl felt bad, you know. But it's not her fault.

AL: Oh sure. But the machinery can be dangerous sometimes.

HB: Oh yes, but you know, the basket rolled over, it hit that switch and the switch went on. And they, you know, the girls are so used, after they finish the stitching, they step on the pedal and send it straight away, you know, to the baskets. But, anyway.

AL: Did you ever have, were you always real, real busy, or did you have time to sort of joke around at work?

JB: Oh yeah, we had time, yeah.

HB: Joke? Oh yes, oh yes. There was a lot of stories.

JB: Yeah, like the time (*unintelligible phrase*), now I don't remember.

HB: Me, you know, the boss told me one day, he says, Henry, they call me Henry because my name is Honore, you know? And he says, you know, he says, when you sit down and you're doing nothing, he says, we're making money.

JB: Yeah, that's right.

HB: But, he says, if you're working that means the machinery is down and we're losing money. So, and then, you know, I tried to keep all the machinery, you know, greased and oiled so they wouldn't shut down. And even the boss, you know, it was somebody's birthday they say, Henry, that's this woman's birthday, so I used to make a star, you know, I used to fold a cardboard like this and I used to make a star, and I says, and on the star it says, on this day this person was born, you know, and I put the year and the date. I never put their, the age, just the year and the day. And then when they open up the star, you know, it said happy birthday. So everybody was signing that card. (*Unintelligible phrase*).

And one time one girl was mad. She didn't want to say her age. Somebody told me the date. She was, I didn't know that. So I put, on this day, you know, that year a star was born. Who told you my date? So everybody knew. And today, -

JB: She's still living.

HB: Yeah, I saw her about a month ago, at d' Youville, she's at d' Youville, and she remember.

JB: Yeah, she does, oh yeah.

HB: She remember that.

AL: She never forgot that.

HB: She didn't, and I didn't either.

AL: If I asked you what are some of your biggest impressions of your time working in the mill, what would your impressions be?

HB: Me, I was, I'm glad I work at the Bates. And what you see, thanks to the Bates.

JB: Yeah, that's right.

HB: See, I got a house, I got a car, you know. Without them, I don't know. So.

AL: Did the union in the mill play a big part in your lives?

HB: Yes, yes.

JB: Yes, yes.

AL: In what way? Good, bad?

HB: It's good.

JB: Good, yeah, it's good.

HB: You know, one thing I can say for myself and I think for her, I never had a complaint from the union or from the Bates. You know, sometimes they, if you do something wrong they would send a letter to the union, you know, and say this is, he did so and so. Never had one.

JB: No, me either.

AL: And did the people that represented the union who were working in the mills, did they like talk to you, you know, are things safe or, are you getting paid enough or, how did that work?

HB: Oh, you know, textile is not like working at the shipyards, you know, I mean you couldn't ask for more money because they were not making that much money, you know? And we got along good, and they never did. We asked, you know, we asked for raises when the time came, and, but only a couple of times that I know they went out for strike.

AL: Yeah, do you, there was one strike that lasted about a month?

HB: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Do you remember that one?

HB: Oh yeah, that's the year that I plant my shrubs around the house.

JB: Yeah, that's right.

HB: They just came at the right time, they came at the right time and the strike came at the right time (*unintelligible word*).

AL: And how did you get through that time? Both of you were at the mill?

JB: Yes.

HB: Oh yeah.

AL: So you both were not working.

HB: But, you know, that's another thing, you know. You got to save some money for rainy day sometimes, so.

JB: We used the rainy day money.

HB: Like they say, you know, if you're not working, you got a slow down or something, some of the work, some of the extras that you got, so we survived.

AL: Did you interact with Fred Lebel?

HB: Yes, Fred Lebel was, yes, super, he was big chief at the end at the Bates. He owns, now he's still working at the Hill mill. I saw him about, oh, about a month ago.

JB: A month ago, his wife.

HB: His wife was at the d' Youville and he remember me, he remember my name, Honore. He says, Henry, but he says, no, he says, it's Honore, you know. And for a president to remember your name, with all those peoples are working, well, you know. I was proud of myself, because who would remember after, you know, I retired 1989, heart attack. I was going to make fifty years, but I quit.

JB: Yeah, that's right.

AL: So you retired right before the mills closed.

HB: Oh yes, just before. And, well, you know, disabled, heart attack. So I'm so lucky I'm still alive. Thank God.

JB: That's right.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think we should add to this today, something I missed about the mills or growing up in Lewiston? Lewiston used to be like a shopping center, didn't it? What was that like?

JB: It was nice. We used to go shop every Saturday, us, my mother and me. Yeah, we used to go shop on Lisbon Street, and we like it. No more now.

HB: And you know, after we, you know, in the old days it was Lisbon Street, we used to walk on Lisbon Street, you know, doing the window shopping on Sunday. And then Saturday night we used to go to different towns, cities, you know, and go and shopping. We used to go to West Gardiner, you know, when, Gardiner, and shop along the streets, and go to Portland and walk on Congress Street. You could go to a show, we'd go to a show early and then we walk the street. Today, well.

JB: No, that's a -

HB: Oh yeah, there's a lot of things that you won't, you'll never see. Like Pleasant View Acres, that was just woods there. We used to go raspberry picking, you know. There was a lot of it. They had, in where the Pleasant View Acres, they had, in the woods they had an apple tree, didn't belong to nobody, you know. They were so good, the apples were good. Nobody took care of it, and there was no worm or nothing, it was good apples. And they had grapevines. Now everything's destroyed now, they got houses now. So that's where I spend my childhood, playing baseball, over here after we got married, next lot from here, that was empty and we make a volleyball court, and the people from downtown used to come and play volleyball with us. We had a league going over here.

JB: We had the kids, too.

HB: They bring, the guys would bring their kids, you know, they had to keep their kids, and she got locked up, she got locked out twice.

JB: Over here.

HB: The kids used to come in, you know, and she goes with the kids, you know, and they lock the door, the key was inside. We used to, she had to, she went to her mother.

JB: My mother was living nearby.

HB: And get a key.

JB: Get the key to come in. Oh, my God, those kids, they were awful.

HB: We had a good life.

AL: Well great, thank you both very much for your time.

*End of Interview
breton.int.wpd*